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ABSTRACT

Reading response groups are an outgrowth of theories which suggest that: (1) meaning derived from text is highly individualized and personal, and (2) reader understanding is deepened through interactions among peers. A study examined the non-participation in one reading response group composed of four high-achieving adult readers who were experienced professionals and researchers in the field of reading/language development. The four subjects met at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference and agreed to form a reading response group to maintain and share written response logs related to a book chosen by the group. For one entire year, however, group members sent no monthly response logs to one another nor did they even communicate with each other, although all members completed at least some reading and made some attempts to generate a response log. At the subsequent annual meeting, the members of the group agreed to write introspective, retrospective accounts of their "year of silence." Results indicated that: (1) the combination of unspecified task definition, mixed motives for group membership, and lack of group leadership created a condition of wide-ranging ambiguity which reduced the ability of group participants to identify the means for task completion; (2) task unfamiliarity and social/emotional concerns interacted with intrinsically high-risk tasks to produce an intolerable risk level; and (3) the combined impact of open-ended tasks with new task roles created a condition of high ambiguity/high risk which militated against successful completion of the task. Findings suggest that inhibiting factors associated with ambiguity and risk may seriously reduce, or remove entirely, the benefits expected from peer interactions in reading response groups. (RS)

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THE YEAR OF SILENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF HIGH ACHIEVING READERS' NON-PARTICIPATION IN A READING RESPONSE GROUP

Reading response groups are gaining widespread acceptance as a means for transforming classroom discussion of literary text from "gentle inquisitions" to "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Fundamental to the development of such groups are theoretical views which suggest that 1) meaning derived from text is highly individualized, and is constructed from personal transaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1978), and 2) reader understanding is deepened through interactions between peers for the purpose of sharing personal constructions of meaning, asking questions, and building group meaning (Golden, 1986; Probst, 1989; Vygotsky, 1962, 1968). An increasing body of professional literature promotes classroom use of reading response groups (Eeds & Wells, 1989; O'Flahavan, 1989); however, research at this time is limited regarding actual implementation and maintenance of response group structures (Freedman, 1987). In a national survey of 560 secondary teachers and 715 of their students, Freedman (1985) found that students and teachers alike

were dissatisfied with peer writing response groups, especially with regard to keeping groups on task and the quality of student responses to one another; however, many aspects central to response group functioning remain relatively unexplored. Among other things, we know very little about the causes for student non-participation in reading response groups, the immediate and long-range implications of such non-participation, and the distinction(s) which may exist between soon-to-be-but-not-quite-yet-functioning (hibernating) reading response groups and dysfunctional ones.

The purpose of this case study was to examine non-participation in one reading response group composed of four high-achieving adult readers. The study is unique in a number of ways. First, it is both retrospective and introspective; that is, data collected were individual accounts written one year after the group was formed but during which it did not function - i.e., no one participated. Second, members of the group were four adult female subjects who are, themselves, experienced professionals and researchers in the field of reading/language development and well versed in the literature of reading response groups - a major aspect of the written accounts was reflective analysis to provide access to what each participant had been thinking during the year of silence. And finally, I was a member of the reading response group as well as the individual

conducting the study; data treatment therefore required blending professional knowledge with self-knowledge both in producing my own account, and analyzing it and the accounts written by the other three group members. The following questions served to guide this case study:

1. What were the causes of the year of silence? Why did the group members not participate in the response group during that time?
2. What are the implications of these findings for the use of reading response groups in other settings with adult, adolescent, and child readers?

The Study

The study was conducted on a reading response group begun during a conversation at the 1988 meeting of the National Reading Conference in which the four individuals who were to become the Response Group were informally discussing peer response groups and response journals, how these techniques were used in their own undergraduate and graduate classes, and how they encouraged teachers and student teachers to organize and use them in their teaching. The conversation then veered into a discussion of good books each had read lately or were meaning to read. The book Women's Ways of Knowing was mentioned; everyone had heard about it recently but hadn't read it. The idea soon occurred and plans grew to establish a response group by maintaining and sharing

written response logs related to the book. Each member agreed to purchase the book upon return home, read, distribute response logs to one another monthly, maintain individuality by not reading incoming responses until mailing out their own, and to meet "sometime" at the annual convention of the International Reading Association in May. Everyone agreed that a good part of their interest in the project grew from their belief that the project contained at least two major benefits: 1) it would allow them to communicate as emerging personal friends and professional colleagues in a new and exciting way, and 2) it would require them to apply, in a very real and immediate way, a literacy activity which they routinely discuss and promote in their professional education classes, inservice programs, and other presentations.

The outcome of the project was silence. For the entire year, group members did not send monthly response logs to one another (or even <u>one</u> log to one another), did not meet "sometime" at IRA, and did not communicate with one another at all (with the exception of one sheepish, "We gotta get back to our project" exchange at IRA). At the 1989 NRC meeting, during a "Birds of a Feather" time slot, the group met to look more closely at these non-participation behaviors. This discussion revealed that silence did not mean inactivity: All members had purchased the book, completed at least some reading, and made some attempts to

generate a response log; one member had begun collecting subject-related newspaper and magazine articles. It was further discussed and agreed that given the characteristics of the members of the group - the group was composed of highly literate and accomplished readers and writers, individuals who were academically able and avidly interested in the project - the project should have been a resounding success; by any definition, this group was far from the population one would predict as non-participatory. Given this, the year of silence appeared to be a phenomenon of some import and worthy of further study and examination; exploration of its origin and development might offer some insight into occurrences of non-participation by students of all ages who may or may not share the same academic characteristics.

To initiate and carry out the study, group members agreed to write introspective, retrospective accounts of the year of silence. No specific foci for these accounts were proposed or discussed; each person was therefore free to analyze in any manner she wished why she did not contribute to the reading response group. Members agreed to complete these self-analyses at the earliest possible date; they agreed further to return to Women's Ways of Knowing and resume the original project upon completion of the year of silence accounts. Through tacit, unspoken agreement, the group functioned during the discussion

and proceeded as true peers; no one assumed or was accorded a leadership role and/or coordinating duties.

Results

All participants completed an account. Accounts ranged from 2 to 4-2/3 single-spaced, typed pages; all were written between January 2 and March 20, 1990. Analysis of the accounts revealed a set of complex personal reactions to the year of silence. Though highly individualistic, responses within the accounts could be grouped into categories from which certain themes, or motifs, emerged that support the notion of ambiguity and risk as deterrents to task completion (Doyle & Carter, 1984). "Ambiguity" refers to the extent to which a precise and predictable formula for generating a product can be defined; "risk" refers to the stringency of the evaluation criteria and the likelihood that these criteria can be met on a given occasion (Doyle & Carter, 1984, p. 131).

Three response categories are defined and summarized in Figure 1. Categories include 1) responses associated with Ambiguity, 2) those associated with Risk, and 3) those which contain elements of both Ambiguity and Risk. The eight responses identified with the separate categories of Ambiguity and Risk each occurred in two or more of the four participants' accounts; the two responses under Ambiguity and Risk occurred in at least three of the four accounts.

Insert Figure 1. about here

Ambiguity

Task definition, motives and group roles were the ambiguous elements identified by participants. Issues associated with lack of adequate task definition, purpose and goals were 1) lack of specific "assignment focus," timelines, and dates (members seemed to forget that monthly timelines had, in actuality, been established); and 2) lack of guidelines "telling us what to do" or how to accomplish the task. Mixed motives for participating included issues related to the complex interactions that are part of combined personal/professional relationships. This project was, originally, more personal than professional - members were eager to get to know one another in ways different from the professional persona already known, and to see how an instructional activity they routinely recommend would actually feel applied to themselves; one member described her conception of it as an opportunity for "chatting with friends about a common interest." Participants reported that in the face of very full personal and professional lives, and the need to allocate time, personally satisfying tasks were frequently most easily left undone. Two responses summarize this complex issue and the internal ambiguity it creates. One member states,

> . . . how silent I am to my family and friends when under the crush of one deadline after another. And I am not a little ashamed to be writing this reflection to share with colleagues while my letter to my parents waits for this, yet another, deadline to pass. The real question here is not just time but also values. Even the values are hard to sort out. Again, should I be downstairs with my family instead of here with the computer and distant friends?

Another writes,

> We are all meeting deadlines of one sort or another either within our institutions or our outside professional commitments. Being an academic seems to be a constant juggling act of competing priorities. Ours was a good project, important to us individually and as a group, but when it initially did not have a particular purpose beyond personal, I can see why it failed to emerge when each of us undoubtedly has a long list of "must do's" professionally. At the personal level, . . . the project may have also been doomed from the start because of too little time to allocate among competing, present, and immediate needs.

The final ambiguous element identified by the group was the lack of designated leadership which left the group rudderless when it began (and continued) to fail. One member commented, "Informal structures in leaderless groups don't have a high success rate."

In sum, the combination of an unspecified task definition, conflicts between personal/professional needs, and a leaderless group created a condition of wide-ranging ambiguity; it appears that no "precise and predictable formula for generating a product" (Doyle & Carter, 1984) could be discerned within such a condition.

Risk

Risk elements identified in responses, as shown in Figure 1, are divided between risks associated with the task (#'s 1 and 2), and those associated with social/emotional safety (#'s 3, 4, 5). Unfamiliarity with the task constituted a common thread throughout the four accounts. All members mentioned that they were unaccustomed to sharing journals with peers, followed immediately by comments regarding the personal and private nature of the task. Comments included, "I just didn't know quite what to do. . . [but I realized that] writing is very personal and private," and, "Behind everything I wrote was my realization that other people were going to read this - it wasn't my own confidential diary." Underlying the issues related to task risk are additional issues associated with social/emotional safety. Lack of established trust system between group members was yet another element associated with the peculiar nature of personal/professional friendships. Comments noted that while members felt a certain closeness to one another, they knew each

other only superficially; saw one another, generally, only two or three times a year; and had few, if any, deep social or emotional ties to override the effects of ambiguity and risk. This led to feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy, which seemed to spiral participants into competitiveness, avoidance, and self-consciousness. One member comments, "[I felt I] couldn't possibly produce insights and understandings of sufficient depth and erudition to compete with the rest of the group." Another states, "Writing . . . creates a profound sense of vulnerability in me . . . that I'm not so sure I want." And yet another says,

> Surprisingly, I had all these funny little doubts and worries: Must it be in longhand? Would it be 'cheating' to use my computer? Would my response be 'right'?!!! Could I use a comfortable, informal style, or should I be scholarly and formal? What if I said something stupid? Should I write a response after every chapter or after each time I read? Am I going too fast? Too slowly?

Finally, then, the need to protect personal and professional self led to non-participation; attempts to produce journal entries were simply non productive. Accounts characterized failed attempts to produce journal entries as "hollow," "phony" and "stilted," uncharacteristically lacking in voice, and self-censored to such a degree as to block production and further writing. From these accounts, it appears that task unfamiliarity

and social/emotional needs contributed substantially to the difficulty of a task in which the task product itself was highly personal; group members thus constructed such stringent criteria for peer evaluation that they, themselves, increased the risk beyond a level which they were able to tolerate.

Ambiguity and Risk

Elements pertaining both to ambiguity and to risk, shown in Figure 1, are somewhat overlapping, but not completely, with elements itemized in each of the separate protocols. Most notable is that each of these elements was mentioned in at least three of the four accounts, and that they are, to an extent, "umbrella" elements that contain a number of the elements discussed earlier. Need for prototype model appeared to be of primary importance to all members. One member, in recounting her year of silence, used a refrain, "I decided to wait a little while - see what everybody else was doing" to summarize various stages and phases of activity (and inactivity) she experienced. Another said, "I was waiting for you, any of you, to go first. . ." to "get some signals" about what to do. This hesitancy, this waiting, was tied closely to aspects of task definition, task unfamiliarity, personal/professional relationships, and social/emotional needs. Of further significance was the unfamiliarity with task role. Here again, it is difficult to separate task role from task definition or familiarity; however,

accounts drew clear distinction between members' roles in using response journals previously - "Many of us have used journals with our classes, where students write comments on their readings or on their experiences. However, in that situation, our roles have been different. We have been the teachers responding to those students' journals" - and distinguished further between this experience and parallel experiences of professional collaboration in which they were proven to be highly competent and productive. It appears that the combined impact of a totally open-ended task with no model or prototype to follow, and a new and unfamiliar role (peer-respondee vs. teacher-responder) militates against successful completion of a task, even when task participants are quite competent in similar, related tasks.

Discussion and Conclusions

The following statements summarize the main findings of this study: 1) The combination of unspecified task definition, mixed motives for group membership, and lack of group leadership creates a condition of wide-ranging ambiguity which reduces the ability of group participants to identify the means for task completion; 2) task unfamiliarity and social/emotional concerns interact with intrinsically high-risk tasks to produce a risk level beyond that which is normally tolerable; and 3) the combined impact of open-ended tasks with new task roles creates a condition of high ambiguity/high risk which militates against

successful completion of a task, even when group participants are competent in similar, related tasks. These results are particularly remarkable in light of the characteristics of the group studied, characteristics generally associated with high group cohesion and productivity: Group participants were academically able, accomplished readers and writers; the task was defined and developed by the group members themselves; and the project was highly interesting and important to all members. While the study is limited in a number of ways, and conclusions are necessarily tentative, these findings do serve to suggest that inhibiting factors associated with ambiguity and risk may seriously reduce, or remove entirely, the benefits expected from peer interactions in reading response groups. Further, they suggest the need for additional study of reading response groups to determine how such inhibiting factors may be overridden.

Remarkable also is that the response group studied here did, ultimately, begin to function and is continuing to do so; it was therefore not dysfunctional, but rather hibernating - waiting to be functional. Movement from the year of silence to a fully functioning group occurred through a progression of events which included 1) communication among group members of shared needs, concerns and anxieties; 2) identification and discussion of the risk inherent in the task and task role; 3) individual and group agreement to continue in spite of elements of ambiguity and risk;

4) clarification of task definitions, 5) establishment of overarching goals and a sense of purpose, and 6) division and assignment of individual responsibilities. Critical here is that these events, rather than reducing ambiguity and risk by lowering the complexity of the task itself (Doyle & Carter, 1984), served as scaffolding to support participants through the period when ambiguity and risk were highest. This took some time; however it allowed the revitalization and continuation of the group following the period of silence, and appears to be a promising area for further research. Highly complex literacy activities - reading response groups, writing workshop, literature-based reading instruction, cooperative learning groups, reading workshop, writing response groups, etc. - are currently receiving a great deal of attention and endorsement for daily classroom practice. Students of all ages now face, and in the future will be facing, new and increasingly ambiguous, high-risk tasks in school. It seems reasonable that finding ways to assist students in negotiating ambiguity, rather than removing the complexity and richness of such activities, should be of highest priority.

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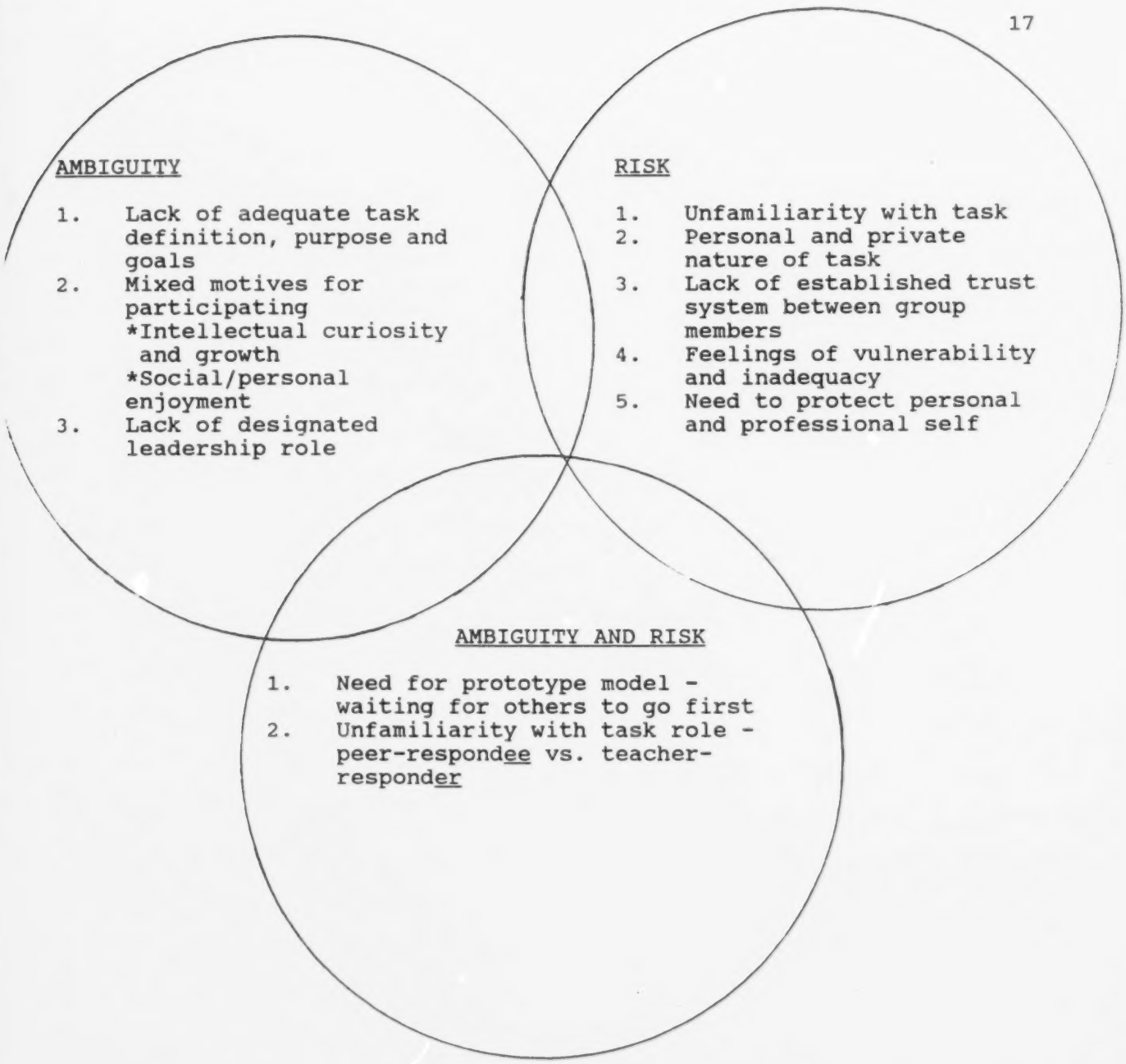
AMBIGUITY
1. Lack of adequate task definition, purpose and goals
2. Mixed motives for participating
*Intellectual curiosity and growth
*Social/personal enjoyment
3. Lack of designated leadership role
RISK
1. Unfamiliarity with task
2. Personal and private nature of task
3. Lack of established trust system between group members
4. Feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy
5. Need to protect personal and professional self
AMBIGUITY AND RISK
1. Need for prototype model - waiting for others to go first
2. Unfamiliarity with task role - peer-respondee vs. teacher-responder

Figure 1. Conditions of Ambiguity and Risk During the Year of Silence